

Labeled Reading Disabled and “Doing Reading”: One College Student’s Reading History

Maryl A. Randel

ABSTRACT: In this work, the author analyzes how Mari, an undergraduate student labeled with a reading disability, describes her reading opportunities and texts throughout her K-16 schooling. Using a disability studies in education lens, the researcher investigated the role that experiences with texts played in Mari’s identity development as a reader. For this interpretive case study, the author analyzed multiple semi-structured interviews and read numerous written responses to texts, using the constant comparative approach (Glaser, 1965). Mari identified several purposes for reading, including accomplishment, school success, and knowledge acquisition. Reading has been and continues to be a very time-consuming and stressful practice for Mari. As a result, initiating reading tasks became a challenging activity, as well as led to a general dislike of reading, and caused anxiety about being stereotyped because of her reading disability label.

Key words: Reading Disability, Identity, Texts, Special Education, Labels



Maryl Randel is a Doctoral Candidate at Michigan State University in the Language and Literacy Education department. Her research focuses on improving access to high quality literacy learning opportunities for vulnerable literacy learners who have been underserved in instructional and intervention contexts. Maryl was a reading specialist and K-8 special education educator for ten years in the Chicago public schools. She can be contacted at randelma@msu.edu

“So I read, but it’s like *not* an activity that I *enjoy* doing.” – Mari

In our society, we are surrounded by printed and digital texts; however, many individuals experience tremendous difficulties reading these texts every day. In order to be successful in school and in modern life, strong reading abilities have been recognized as a crucial component. Yet, many students reach adulthood without having developed strong reading skills in school (Hock et al., 2009). Many potential barriers exist, both within and outside of a classroom, which may prevent an individual from being able to benefit fully from reading instruction in school, including what all students do to read and write with ease in school (Allington, 2002; 2007; Donmeyer & Kos, 1993; Hall, 2009; Harry & Klingner, 2006). Students who continuously do not meet reading achievement expectations based on standardized test scores are at risk for being assigned labels of “reading disabled.” A reading disability is the most common type of learning disability. In fact, individuals with reading disabilities make up approximately 80% of all students who are labeled with learning disabilities in schools (Alvermann & Mallozzi, 2009), accounting for as much as 4% of the school population (Valencia, 2011).

Recent educational policy initiatives, including the No Child Left Behind Act, Reading First, and Response to Intervention, have been developed with a stated goal of improving reading achievement, often targeting improving support for intervention in early elementary school. More recently, a focus on improving reading instruction in school has expanded to include adolescents (students in 4th-12th grades). These reading initiatives require that teachers use “evidence-based practices” to teach reading, and have considered experimental or quasi-experimental research to be the gold standard of reading research (Shannon, 2007). Although the use of a variety of research methodologies is arguably the best way to build research in a field, these policies have led to funding opportunities privileging quantitative reading research. Alternate theoretical approaches and research methods often have been discredited as unproductive for building knowledge in the reading disability field (Ferri, 2012; Shannon, 2007). As a result, some recent research utilized a

very narrow definition of reading research and viewed reading as an autonomous process, reducing reading to a set of discrete skills (Franzak, 2006; L. S. Fuchs & D. Fuchs, 2009; Wanzek et al., 2013). In order to continue to improve upon the educational experiences for individuals with reading disabilities, more research needs to be conducted utilizing more diverse theoretical and epistemological approaches, and in which the individuals themselves are viewed as more than a test score (Gallagher, Connor, & Ferri, 2014).

Defining Reading Disability

Research in the reading disability field has focused historically on defining reading disability, as well as developing and measuring reading interventions designed to cure and/or eliminate reading disabilities (Connor, 2013). Prior to the early twenty-first century, students with reading disabilities in the United States primarily have been identified utilizing a medical model of disability. Using a medical model of disability, reading disability is viewed as a deficit or impairment that prevents an individual from typical reading development. The reading disabled label is assigned to an individual after a psychologist identified a discrepancy between the student’s intelligence and reading achievement based on norm-referenced intelligence and achievement tests (Friend, 2006; D. Fuchs, L. S. Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010). The controversy and critiques regarding both the definition and identification process of individuals labeled with reading disabilities continue today, as newer approaches, such as Response to Intervention, are considered and critiqued (Ferri, 2012; D. Fuchs, L. S. Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010; Schatschneider, Wagner, & Crawford, 2008).

In contrast to the medical model of disability, a disability studies in education (DSE) lens attempts to humanize reading disability research by recognizing that the individual is of particular importance and acknowledging the marginalization of individuals who have been given reading disability labels. DSE scholars recognize the natural diversity that exists among individuals, and suggest that all individuals have areas of strength and need, but it is society that positions individuals as “other” through labeling (Gallagher, Connor, & Ferri, 2014). Using a DSE lens,

researchers and educators can view students with reading disability labels as part of a group of students who are positioned in schools as othered, marginalized, stereotyped, and often segregated. As Rodis, Garrod, and Boscardin (2000) wrote, “There is a person to go along with every learning disability, and we err in imagining that we have understood the person if we have described his or her learning disability” (p. xiii). Since individuals with reading disabilities historically have been silenced in the research conducted about them (Connor, 2013), utilizing interpretivist approaches to reading disability research can improve understanding of the issues involved in particular aspects of their lives (Alvermann & Mallozzi, 2009).

Although not common, interpretive research, which is focused on learning from informants who have been labeled with reading disabilities, can help us researchers to gain important insights and enhance our understanding of reading disabilities (Alvermann & Mallozzi, 2009). For example, we researchers have learned that many individuals with this label have high motivation to improve as readers (Kos, 1991; McCray, Vaughn, & Neal, 2001). We have also learned about the large role that social factors may play in these students’ reading experiences, which can prevent them from benefitting fully from “evidence-based” reading instruction (Collins, 2013; Hall, 2009; Kos, 1991; McCloskey, 2012). This body of work, often including small numbers of participants, has given voice to individuals labeled with reading disabilities who are the true experts of their experiences. By listening to them, we researchers can learn about the experience of living with a reading disability, as they are best positioned to inform us about the numerous ways that their needs have been neglected, and allow us to better meet their needs, particularly in educational contexts.

Reading Disability & Identities

Using a sociocultural model of literacy learning, I acknowledge that, “Learning is not just an

accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming—to become a certain person or, conversely, to avoid becoming a certain person” (Wenger, 1998, p. 215). Learning to read is tied closely with an individual’s identity, and I situate this study within a sociocultural model of reading (Alvermann, 2001; Gee, 2008; Trent, Artiles, & Englert, 1998). In this model, reading is viewed as a cultural practice in which individuals make meaning from texts through participation in certain situated discourses, social norms, and practices (Cole, 1998; Gee, 2008; Street, 1987). Failure is assumed when a student’s ability to navigate texts consistently is considered to be below “normative performance” (Dudley-Marling, 2004; McIntyre, 2011). Within a

“Being considered a poor reader—or having a reading disability—became a way to categorize and label certain students who had been long stigmatized”

sociocultural model, reading “failure” in school is based on a learner’s history, culture, institutions, instruction, and interactions with texts. In fact, until universal schooling became available in the U.S., illiteracy was actually the norm for many children and adolescents (Allington, 2010; Shannon, 2007). Without expecting all children to learn to read, the construct of a

reading disability based on failing to learn to read did not exist. Toward the end of the twentieth century, however, literacy expectations changed, and it became apparent that all students did not learn to read easily. Being considered a poor reader—or having a reading disability—became a way to categorize and label certain students who had been long stigmatized, placed in separate classes, given different curricula, and for whom expectations had been often lowered (Allington, 2007; Connor, 2008; Ferri, 2012; Rodis, Garrod, & Boscardin, 2000).

Sociocultural theories also acknowledge that reading disability is socially constructed, and once assigned, a reading disability becomes one part of an individual’s identity along with the individual’s history (Gee, 2008; Wenger, 1998). Gee (2000) goes on to define identity as “being recognized as a certain type of person within a given context” (p. 1). He acknowledges that each individual has multiple identities, which allow her to be perceived as a certain kind of person in certain situations (Gee,

2000; 2008). Using Gee's (2000) four-category analytic lens for identity, we researchers can identify which identities are taken up for individuals labeled with reading disabilities, and when they choose or prefer not to disclose reading disability, specifically during and surrounding the reading of texts. When one looks at reading disability from a nature point of view, a reading disability is a fixed identity that an individual was born with, and this nature identity is aligned with a medical, or deficit, model of reading disability. From an institutional point of view, an individual is recognized as having a reading disability when a psychologist—or school documentation—has determined that the individual is reading disabled. Gee also describes discursive identities as occurring when one is recognized as being part of an affinity group. For example, when grappling with reading a complex text, one might be identified as an individual who struggles with reading, or has a reading disability; yet in a non-reading situation, this identity may not be recognized. Finally, affinity identities can be taken up when individuals are part of a distinct group even if they are geographically distant. This group could be based on a social practice, such as being an avid reader or a Harry Potter fan. In alignment with sociocultural theories of reading and reading difficulties, Gee's identity framework is helpful to understand the multiple situational differences in how one chooses to be identified and/or when identities may position students in certain ways.

For many years, reading researchers and educators have discussed the numerous difficulties that students with reading disabilities face in school: where they are likely to be positioned in certain ways when given texts that are too difficult for them to read independently, when reading instruction may not accelerate their reading achievement, or when a desire for social acceptance is above and beyond their desire to improve their reading abilities (Allington, 2002; 2007; Connor, 2008; Hall, 2009; McKloskey, 2013). Although graduation and postsecondary education rates are improving, after years of experiencing reading difficulties in school, many students with reading disabilities do not graduate from high school or enroll in postsecondary education (Wagner, Cameto, & Newman, 2003).

While we researchers have learned about some of the reading and school experiences of individuals who have reading disabilities, we have very limited information about the role of specific texts and how they might contribute to the identity of individuals with reading disabilities. Few researchers have sought to investigate the role that specific texts may have played in the identity development of individuals who have been labeled with reading disabilities. Two informants from larger studies that foregrounded the voices of individuals who have reading disabilities identified specific texts and acknowledged the way that a specific genre or text stood out in their memory, and how it was related to their lives as readers. In David Connor's (2008) *Urban Narratives*, Chantal mentioned her love of poetry and the important role it played in her life. In *Scars of Dyslexia* (Edwards, 1994), John noted that he "read *Roderick the Great* six times during two years. [He] knew it off by heart. [He] chose it. It was the only easy one there (Edwards, 1994, p. 27)." His statements suggest that he read the same book repeatedly because it was the only book at his school that he could read. For both Chantal and John, texts played distinct, but opposing, roles in their lives.

Individuals with reading disability labels may have had limited access to appropriate and accessible texts both in and out of school. Additionally, the texts themselves may be particularly relevant, since it is, in fact, difficulties with reading texts themselves that occur before an individual can be identified by a reading disability label. We researchers know that students who are members of non-dominant groups based on race, language, and socioeconomic status can easily be marginalized in schools based on a failure of classroom texts and curricular materials to meet their diverse needs (Enriquez, 2011; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Hill, 2009; Kirkland, 2011; McCloskey, 2012). Research suggests that reading meaningful texts can particularly be useful in helping individuals who are members of groups that have been traditionally oppressed in schools, and can be useful in building a curriculum to support positive identity development (Alvermann, 2001; Hill, 2009; Kirkland, 2011; Paris, 2012; Winn, 2011; Woodcock, 2010).

According to Torres-Velásquez (2000), "We can no longer afford to ignore the histories, cultures, and experiences of learners if we expect those learners to

play an active role in constructing their future” (p. 69). Ignoring the reading histories and role of reading disability in identity formation is not only a mistake, but continues to position individuals with reading disabilities as objects. In order to provide better support to individuals with reading disabilities so that they construct positive identities, we researchers can begin by finding out how they view themselves in order to try and ensure that they develop positive relationships with literacy (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009).

Present Study

The purpose of my current study is to examine closely—and learn from—the experiences, opportunities, and identities related to the reading of texts for an individual who has a reading disability label. This study is important for several reasons. First, in contrast to a medical model of reading disability focused on reading disability definitions or instructional intervention, I utilized a disability studies in education lens and an interpretivist perspective to guide this work. This process required listening closely to one individual who had been given a reading disability label, and how she identified herself as a reader both in and out of school contexts. In addition, understanding reading as a social and cultural practice, I focused her multiple situated identities around reading and on the role(s) that specific texts may have played throughout her life. My focus on the specific texts that she read, was asked to read, and currently reads also provides an opportunity to begin to understand the role texts can play within the identity formation of one individual labeled with reading disabilities. The following questions guided this work:

- 1) What role has a reading disability label played in the K-20 reading experiences of a college student?
- 2) How have texts affected the individual's identity development as a reader with a reading disability label?

Methods

A humanizing stance (Paris & Wynn, 2013) toward the research process guided the design of this interpretive study. This stance is important

particularly when doing research with individuals who are members of groups that have historically been marginalized in research conducted about them. I utilized an instrumental case study approach (Barone, 2011) in order to develop nuanced understandings of complex situations based on the experiences of one person. Interviewing utilizes dialogue to gain understanding about a topic with the hope of raising consciousness for both my informant and for myself (Paris, 2011; Paris & Wynn, 2013). In alignment with a disability studies in education approach to reading disability and sociocultural theories of literacy learning, I attempted to provide a detailed portrait of one individual's reading history experiences with reading and texts by positioning her as an expert and using her own words as data sources. Prior to beginning data collection, the university's Social Science Institutional Review Board (SIRB) approved this project (#1040744).

Participant

Mari (pseudonym) was a 21-year-old college student studying elementary education at a large, public Midwestern university at the time of this study. Mari described herself as a White, Jewish female from a middle class family who has a reading disability. Mari grew up with her brother, mother, and father in a medium-sized city in the Midwest, and attended public schools throughout her educational career. She was also a member of the university honor society, and had a 3.9 grade point average when she consented to participate in this project during her senior year. Having excelled academically in college, she had also recently received several academic and need-based scholarships.

Mari and I had known each other for just over a year when I contacted her and she agreed to participate in this project, for which she was given a \$25 gift card. The previous year, she was enrolled in a foundational, undergraduate education course I taught, which focused on diverse learners in schools. After the first class, Mari privately identified herself as an individual with a reading disability, and shared her university-issued list of accommodations with me. During the semester, although two of her classmates publically discussed their disabilities during class discussions about disability, Mari did

not. She did, however, write about her reading disability in weekly reading response assignments, which were read by me, alone.

Researcher Positionality

I approached this project as a White, able-bodied female, former special education teacher, teacher educator, and doctoral student studying literacy and special education. I consider myself a “bookworm.” Learning to read print came easily to me, and I recognize that I will never truly understand the experiences of individuals for whom reading has been particularly challenging. As a former K-12 special education teacher, most of my students were labeled with reading disabilities. Regardless, I attempted to foster a love of reading and books in all of my students through access to authentic texts of interest from a variety of genres, and by providing autonomy and choice related to text selections. As her former instructor, I knew Mari in a classroom setting, and after the semester ended, she periodically asked me to write recommendation letters for her. Since we remained in contact, and I knew that she identified herself as having a reading disability, I contacted her to see if she would be interested in participating in this project.

Data Sources

For this project, I interviewed Mari on three occasions during a three-week period in the spring semester of her senior year. Each semi-structured interview (Glesne, 2006) lasted 60-90 minutes. The first interview was focused on the children’s literature course that she was enrolled in during that semester. We discussed the books that she was reading, and her feelings about the class, which was a required course for her elementary education major. Two additional life story interviews (Shacklock & Thorp, 2005), which are personal accounts of truths as known to the individual, focused on her school experiences with reading, texts, and the impact of a reading disability label. Although Mari initially agreed to allow me to observe her during her children’s literature class, she emailed me to tell me that she changed her mind shortly after our first interview. She told me that her group members were often unfocused during class discussions, and that she did not feel confident or comfortable with me

observing her in class. As an alternative to class observations, Mari provided copies of the course syllabus and texts in addition to five reading response papers that she wrote for the children’s literature course. Additionally, I used eight reading responses and a course paper—book critique—that Mari wrote in her disability through diversity course, for which I was her instructor. The interviews and written reading responses allowed me to learn about Mari’s experiences with reading and texts both in and out of K-12 schooling and as a college student.

Data Analysis

The primary data used for this analysis were three interviews about reading, texts, and Mari’s school experiences. I listened to each interview twice before transcribing it in its entirety. I used open coding to identify initial themes to answer each research question (Glesne, 2006), and utilized the constant comparative approach (Glaser, 1965) to look for data in order to confirm or disconfirm initial hypotheses. I coded the interviews before I coded Mari’s written reading responses and papers. Her written texts were examples of responses to required course readings, submitted to two different instructors, and provided an additional layer to my analysis. Next, I returned to Gee’s identity lens and analyzed my coded data, paying attention to Mari’s nature, institutional, discursive, and affinity identities. In addition, by applying Gee’s four identity categories to the situations that Mari mentioned during our interviews, the numerous and frequent tensions that existed among Mari’s various identities became apparent to me. This process allowed me to gain understanding about the contexts in which Mari took up her identity as an individual with a reading disability. It also allowed me to recognize the situations in which she did not disclose it. After completing my analysis, I shared my findings with Mari. She found my analysis to be interesting, was in agreement with my conclusions, and looked forward to sharing the findings with her family. She also hoped that others would be able to benefit from her decision to share her reading experiences through this project.

Findings

In this section, I will discuss the findings that came out of this study in order to continue and expand the conversation about identity and reading disabilities in relation to texts and school experiences.

Background: School Experiences and Reading Disability

Mari stated that her parents first became aware of her struggles with reading during a conference with her second grade teacher. Shortly after the meeting, Mari recalled that she and a classmate started being pulled out during their reading class for extra reading instruction. This small group reading instruction continued throughout elementary school. Although she felt isolated and self-conscious about having to leave class, she didn't recall discussing her feelings with anyone. In middle school, she was placed into a remedial reading class along with other students who had also been identified as "struggling readers." Mari didn't recall the class being particularly helpful, and believed that it may have actually caused her to fall further behind her peers who were in regular English/language arts classes. At that time, Mari's parents had a private psychologist evaluate Mari, and he labeled her with mild dyslexia. Dyslexia is a type of reading disability that is indicated by severe difficulties with phonics and word recognition. Although many students with reading disabilities are placed in special education, Mari's parents opted for her to receive accommodations from a 504 plan. A 504 plan is a legal document referring to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation and Americans with Disabilities Act, which ensures that medical conditions or impairments do not prevent students from being able to participate fully in school. Mari's 504 plan provided her with certain accommodations in general education courses, such as extra time on exams and access to audio versions of texts so that her reading disability would not keep her from being successful with school-related reading tasks.

Throughout high school, Mari continued receiving necessary reading accommodations, including extra time to take tests and read assignments, and she was eventually able to be very successful in school without receiving special education services. In addition, she was reevaluated after graduating from high school, and was again found eligible for a

reading disability label that allowed her to continue to receive accommodations at the college level through her university's disability center. Although she believed that her reading abilities improved over time, her reading disability remained a part of her identity. Mari's reading disability primarily only affected her in educational settings, or when she was working on school-related tasks. However, reading continues to be extremely time-consuming for her, and is a particularly unpleasant activity.

Why Read?

My analysis of Mari's experiences with texts found that she has both positive and negative reading experiences. I identified several themes related to the purposes reading served for Mari, including reading for accomplishment, reading for school success, and reading for knowledge development.

Reading for accomplishment. When initially asked about memorable books that she read during school, Mari told me that her first positive experience with reading was during middle school. Reading *Tuck Everlasting* (Babbit, 1975) stood out for Mari because she recalled that she "actually read the whole book that time." This comment was the first of many in which Mari identified feelings of accomplishment upon reading an entire text. On several additional occasions during our interviews, Mari stated that she had read the "whole book" when referring to pieces of literature that she read in their entirety.

Although she didn't specifically recall many texts that she read during elementary school, Mari shared her personal strategy for selecting books to read during her elementary school's Drop Everything and Read (D.E.A.R.) time.

I would probably always pick simpler books to read...

You know, something that was easy for me to finish.

I can read this in the 30 minutes and when it is over I accomplished that.

I don't really remember...reading through any chapter books.

Again, responses like this identify Mari's feeling of accomplishment after reading an entire book. She sought out books that she knew she could finish in the allotted school reading time in order to have a more pleasurable reading experience.

During high school, reading *East of Eden* (Steinbeck, 1952) was memorable for Mari. It was particularly noteworthy because her older brother, who she described as "really into reading," claimed it was his favorite book by his favorite author, John Steinbeck. Although she admitted that she hadn't really connected with the book on a personal level, Mari was especially proud to be able to tell her brother that she read it.

Mari identified *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) as the best book she read in the children's literature course she was taking. Mari was particularly proud that she finished reading *The Hunger Games* novel before she went to see the movie version. She knew that her mother would be pleased that she read a book before seeing the movie, a practice her mother encouraged her to do. Having a stronger personal connection with two other books she read in that course was less relevant to selecting a favorite book—in Mari's opinion—than was engaging in a reading practice that she knew was valued by her mother.

In contrast, Mari admitted that she often abandoned books—or even series—that she started. Several years ago, she wanted to see the movie version of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997). Her mother insisted that she read the book first. After her entire family listened to the audiobook during a car trip, she "never made it through the series." Mari also discussed the difficulties that she experienced in college managing and completing the heavy reading load assigned each semester. She felt that it was impossible for her to read the assigned readings for each class thoroughly. When she didn't have enough time to finish an assigned text, she possibly resorted to reading an online summary instead. Being able to read something carefully and in its entirety—whether it was a piece of literature, a textbook, or an article for class—seemed to be something Mari valued highly. When she was unable to finish a text, she felt disappointed in herself.

Reading for school success. Success in college is often related to reading and writing tasks. Mari excelled in her university coursework, despite the associated heavy reading load. Her reading responses collected for this study suggest that she is able to engage with multiple genres of text (e.g. literature, autobiography, journal articles). They also suggest a thorough understanding of each text, as well as thoughtful reflection, insights, and evaluations of the books she read. Mari's reading responses demonstrated her ability to respond to texts in ways that were likely to be recognized by her instructors as meaningful, and allowed her to demonstrate her reading competence and avoid looking less competent than her peers by meeting or exceeding their expectations.

Mari shared numerous ways in which reading supported her academic success. During our second interview, she discussed taking two challenging high school courses: advanced English and humanities. She recalled that both courses required extensive reading of a number of particularly challenging texts. For example, she remembered reading work by Freud in the Humanities class. Although Mari did not enjoy either class at the time, her parents encouraged her to complete them, and she did so successfully. She believed that persevering and completing two challenging, text-heavy high school courses helped her develop both skills and strategies that contributed to her ability to persevere and succeed in her college coursework.

Throughout our interviews, Mari mentioned using reading strategies such as highlighting, outlining, and taking notes to summarize and learn the material that she read for her college courses. She stated that her roommates typically read in their apartment living room, in front of the television. In contrast, she intentionally read in a quiet place so that she could read purposefully and without distractions. For example, when she knew that she would be tested on material, she would read it very carefully. In contrast, Mari was more likely to skim a course reading if she believed that less thorough knowledge would be sufficient in order to meet the instructor's expectations. Reading with a purpose in mind allowed her to identify the reading strategies that best permit her to succeed.

One month before I started interviewing Mari, she was awarded a fellowship to complete a project within the disability center at her university. Her goal was to connect the knowledge about reading instruction that she acquired through her education program with her own personal experiences and successes navigating reading tasks in college. She believed that she could contribute to improving services for others with reading disabilities. Her project resulted in her working closely with several undergraduate students throughout an academic year in order to increase their ability to utilize strategies that she found effective herself, and that she learned could support individuals who were having difficulties with reading comprehension. She worked to organize several sessions for other university students with reading disabilities. She worked closely with several undergraduates who were interested in additional reading support as they navigated their text-heavy college coursework—such as setting a purpose for reading, highlighting, and note-taking—and using assistive technologies that they believed were useful. She believed that as an individual who had a reading disability, she was uniquely positioned to improve upon the reading support that the university disability center could provide to others with reading disabilities.

Reading for knowledge development. At the time of this study, more of Mari's course readings were related to her elementary education major. She noted that she had a lot of required reading, but that she was generally motivated to read the material. She stated:

It's not like I need to do this to do well in a course

But it's like I need to learn this if I want to be a teacher, you know.

I need to read it to know, and that's definitely more motivating than in the past.

Sometimes I'd have courses and am like 'Why am I reading this?'

This conversation was the first and only time during our interviews that Mari acknowledged how the majority of her reading in college seemed unrelated to her future goals.

During her children's literature course, Mari and her classmates read *One Crazy Summer* (Williams-Garcia, 2010). She led her group's discussion of the book. Mari appreciated having read the book because it helped her learn about the Black Panther movement in California, which was not something she knew much about. The middle grade novel provided a very different perspective, countering her earlier beliefs that the movement had been a violent one. During her group's discussion, other classmates also identified this book as being an informative and useful text for their future students to read.

Finally, although she preferred reading paper texts to e-texts, Mari occasionally read news from Google's homepage—or social networking sites, like Facebook. She found reading to be a valuable way for her to learn about important events so that she could legitimately participate in discussions about current events with peers. She appreciated being able to say, "Oh yeah, I read about that online."

Anxiety and Reading

The emotional side of reading and reading disability was evident throughout my meetings with Mari, as well as in some of her written responses from the diverse learners course. During each interview, Mari described the anxiety and stress she regularly experienced because of her reading disability. It typically manifested itself in three ways: anxiety about classroom reading assignments, choosing not to disclose her reading disability, and an overall dislike of reading.

"I would get nervous." During elementary school, Mari specifically remembered hoping that she would be able to read all of the words correctly if her teacher called on her to read aloud in class. These feelings of anxiety reappear when she is required to read an entire book. She said:

When I have [entire] novels to read [for homework]

that will be very stressful for me...

That is like 300 pages in less than one week.

She stated that her anxiety about reading often felt overwhelming. When this feeling occurred, she

would “dread” completing the assigned reading and often procrastinated before eventually opening the book.

“I don’t like reading.” In contrast to informants in previous research who identified reading as a positive activity (Connor, 2008; McCray, Vaughn, & Neal, 2001), Mari was very clear about her dislike of reading. A consistent pattern throughout the interviews was that, although she had some positive experiences with specific texts, she stated that she couldn’t *ever* remember enjoying the act of reading. In fact, the last words of her final interview were, *“Reading is always just...it just seems too dreadful.”* Although she stated that she enjoyed being a part of a weekly book discussion group, a requirement in her children’s literature course, she did not believe that she would participate in a book club in the future. She does, however, believe that the reading and discussion of books will be an important part of literacy instruction in her future elementary school classroom.

Mari also expressed a general displeasure with alternative ways to read, including using text-to-speech programs, audio text, or having someone read exams to her, although they are optional accommodations for all of her courses through the university disability center. Although she tried several audio test options, she typically found reading along with electronic texts to be an unhelpful reading support. She didn’t like the voices, and typically the reading speed on audio books was too fast for her to be able to follow along in the book.

“If they don’t ask, I won’t tell.” Mari usually chose not to disclose her reading disability in order to prevent being stereotyped or considered less intelligent by others. In two course assignments with readings including disability themes, she referred to her reading disability as a “secret identity.” During our interviews, Mari discussed several situations in which she decided not to disclose her disability to university instructors and other students. She has only self-identified as an individual with a reading disability to close friends and family members. Although she doesn’t remember experiencing overt discrimination related to her disability, she often chooses not to take up her identity as an individual with learning disability in many social and classroom

situations. On several occasions during college, after telling a peer that she had a reading disability, he or she expressed disbelief or confusion after her disclosure because she was academically successful in college and a member of the honors college. She then had to explain to her peer that she was not less intelligent, but that it took her a little longer to read and to process things.

Mari generally preferred to be identified as an honor student, another part of her identity, which has a positive status, and an identity that many assume to be incompatible with a reading disability label. Mari regularly volunteered at her university’s disability center, activities that were sponsored by her honor society, which included reading books for people with reading disabilities and/or vision impairments. During her service, she again chose not to disclose her reading disability to staff or other honor society members so that she would not be perceived as less competent or subordinate as a volunteer. Her decision not to take up her reading disability has allowed her to see how others view disability, making some of her university service experiences more complex. She recalled the first honor society meeting in which she learned about the plan to do volunteer work with the student disability center. She and the rest of the group of honor society students were asked if they knew anyone with a disability. Mari was unsure how to respond and said nothing. The question itself supported a stereotypical view that students with disabilities could not also be honor students. As part of this volunteer work with the disability center, she read tests to students with disabilities, and read books aloud for students who were entitled to these accommodations based on their recognized need. Interestingly, through the disability resource center, she was also entitled to these very same accommodations.

Discussion

In this work, I focused on identifying the roles that reading and texts played throughout the life of a college student who had been labeled “reading disabled” when she was in middle school. A successful honor student who also identified with a reading disability, Mari navigated her academic life at the intersection of these two identities, which are typically considered to be incompatible. Often,

reading researchers and educators assume that individuals with reading disabilities use limited cognitive strategies when reading, and would benefit from reading strategy instruction (Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker, 2001). Mari, however, specifically described how she used a variety of cognitive strategies when she read, based on her reading purpose, the context, and the text itself. In fact, not only did she develop cognitive strategies in order to comprehend texts, but similar to individuals with reading difficulties profiled in recent, related research (Collins, 2013; Hall, 2009; McCloskey, 2012), Mari developed strategies that enabled her to be recognized as competent by her classmates, instructors, family, and friends. Additionally, for Mari, it seemed that certain texts served as identity markers with multiple purposes. Reading a specific text can allow an individual to pass as a “good” reader (Connor, 2008; Edwards, 1994; Kos, 1991; McCloskey, 2012), and has helped Mari to gain social capital, most often from her family, peers, and instructors. By reading texts in certain socially-acceptable ways (e.g. reading the book before seeing the movie), Mari was able to take up the identity of a successful reader. Reading specific texts allowed Mari to feel a sense of personal accomplishment, seemingly leading to professional success in the education field.

Even though, at the time of this study, Mari was a successful student at a large research university with a very high grade point average, reading continued to be a challenging and anxiety-provoking activity. In contrast to the middle school-aged participants in McCray, Vaughn, and Neal’s (2001) study who all enjoyed reading, Mari did not. Although she was able to use reading successfully in order to suit her needs, not even a strong personal connection with a text could make the act of reading an enjoyable experience for her. A common goal of many reading teachers is to foster a love of reading (Kittle, 2013), and it was a goal that Mari, as a pre-service teacher, also had for her future students. Throughout our interviews, Mari made it clear that all reading activities were time-consuming, and that many caused her tremendous stress, which forced her to self-identify as a disabled reader, and could potentially lead to others to recognize her as a

struggling reader. Perhaps it was the potential risks to her preferred identity that made reading especially unpleasant.

Looking only at Mari’s course reading responses, one might conclude that Mari enjoyed reading a variety of texts, connected personally with texts, and was an avid reader. Her written reading responses for her children’s literature course suggested that she valued many texts and connected to several of them personally. When written responses to texts were required for a course, she was able to participate in ways that allowed her to be recognized, and identified as an individual who was a good reader. However, my interviews with Mari suggested that these reading experiences were less relevant to her than my analysis of her written coursework alone might suggest.

Pope (2001) suggested in her work that the academically-successful teen informants in her study were “doing school,” and it seemed likely that Mari was “doing reading.” Mari was able to code switch effectively based on the task, audience, and context of reading activity. By that statement, I suggest that Mari was aware that her instructors, myself included, expected her to engage with and respond to texts with a certain tone, and to utilize certain practices in order to demonstrate competency. Knowing these expectations, Mari made sure that her written work demonstrated attributes that allowed her to be recognized as a capable student who was a successful reader. Society, educational institutions, and/or individuals do not place equal value on all identities. Mari strategically took up a “good reader” identity—aligned with being an honor student—in reading responses for her children’s literature course, and likely in her book discussions with peers. Individuals with reading disabilities are likely to be perceived as less intelligent and less capable (Collins, 2013; May & Stone, 2010), and Mari typically chose not to disclose her reading disability in order to avoid being discriminated against or stereotyped. Those types of reactions can result in individuals with reading disabilities feeling ambivalent about themselves, as well as having an overall sense of self-fragmentation (Valle, Solis, Volpitta, & Connor, 2004).

In contrast to viewing reading disabilities as being problematic and as individual deficiencies that must be cured by clinicians and/or specialists, Mari views her reading disability as being a continuous part of her identity. She also believes that the label and accompanying reading challenges may have had several positive effects on her. She stated that the many reading challenges she faced made her into a hard-working, empathetic individual who is successful. Mari and I discussed the possibility that she might have been as successful as she was in college *because* of her reading disability. Since reading was such a difficult task, she became used to spending a great deal of time on reading assignments during middle and high school. By the time she entered college, she had already developed strong outlining and note-taking skills to meet the reading demands of her high school courses. These skills seem to have supported her well in college, as she ended her freshman year with a 4.0 grade point average. Mari's success as a college freshman is particularly noteworthy, as many first-year college students with and without reading disabilities struggle to manage the increased reading load and higher course demands of postsecondary coursework successfully. Her strong work ethic and diligent reading practices may have actually allowed her to develop the additional identities of successful college student, honor roll student, tutor of college students with reading disabilities, and even a volunteer who reads to others who have text to speech accommodations at her university's disability center.

Implications

As Chimamanda Adichie (2009) reminded listeners in her speech, "The Danger of a Single Story," having a single story of a group of people, such as those labeled with reading disabilities, allows for an

incomplete understanding of a diverse group of individuals. This project gives voice to the reading experiences of a single individual whose voice is rarely heard—a highly successful female honor student with a reading disability—and helps researchers to recognize and attend to the idiosyncratic nature of reading disabilities. Mari's experiences with reading and texts serve as a counternarrative, which challenges outsiders to reconsider what it means to be labeled with a reading disability, and functions to combat the deficit focus and negative stigma associated with

"Mari's experiences with reading and texts serve as a counternarrative, which challenges outsiders to reconsider what it means to be labeled with a reading disability"

reading disability (Collins, 2013; Connor, 2013; Donmeyer & Kos, 1993). As only a select few researchers have done in the past decade (Collins, 2013; Connor, 2008; 2013; Hall, 2009; McCloskey, 2012), continuing to produce interpretivist research about individuals labeled with reading disabilities can help grow the field, and allow us researchers and educators to gain a more thorough understanding of the roles that reading and texts play in these

individuals' identity development (Alvermann & Mallozzi, 2009).

U.S. educational policy initiatives narrowly focus on academic achievement in high school and college matriculation as measures of success. If one looks only at these measures, Mari's story is a successful one. Although she struggled with reading throughout school, she earned good grades in high school, was awarded several scholarships, and was admitted into the honor society at her university. However, at what cost has this success come? It seems troubling that in order to achieve at Mari's level, reading turned into something she considers "dreadful" and avoids when possible. One of the foci of the Common Core State Standards is to ensure that all students are reading complex texts (National Governors Association, 2010). This rhetoric suggests that a curricular change is necessary to ensure that

students don't lag behind their peers in reading because they don't read complex texts. In contrast, Mari described her ability to read a variety of complex texts successfully during high school and college; however, she included very few positive reading experiences in her descriptions. She also repeatedly stated a general dislike for reading.

Although intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, engagement, and positive identities are all important aspects for literacy instruction, these factors are notably absent from the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (Troia & Olinghouse, 2013). In her theoretical work on undermining aspects of motivation, Coddington (2009) cautions that avoidance and perceiving reading as a difficult practice can also undermine achievement. If we educators really want to design inclusive educational spaces that foster a love of reading, it seems unlikely that the Common Core State Standards' focus on close reading and complex printed texts alone will be the optimal solution. As more students with reading disabilities are college bound, maybe stakeholders should reconsider the text-centric nature of school learning—particularly in secondary and post-secondary schooling—and consider broader definitions of texts from which content can be learned. Instead of a textbook chapter, having students watch an online podcast or interview could reposition individuals who have been marginalized by consistently narrow views of school texts.

Telling the stories of individuals with disabilities can identify injustices that may encourage professionals in the education field to take action and remedy these undesirable situations (Pugach, 2001). In addition to expanding the role of people who have been historically silenced individuals in reading

research, interpretive research can promote the benefits of listening to students with reading disabilities when trying to improve instructional programming, which can be particularly helpful to practitioners as well as family members (Davis, 2000). As educators are encouraged to use data for instructional decision-making, I argue that listening to students can provide a different form of data—one that may be particularly valuable when used to reconsider practice in ways that more commonly used reading assessment data cannot. Listening to students' experiences may be particularly valuable so that researchers and educators can expand their understanding of the effects of persistent reading difficulties and that certain students may be positioned by texts, reading activities, and assignments in their classrooms.

Historically, a reading disability has been considered a deficit within an individual that can be fixed or cured when given appropriate instruction. Mari's experiences allow us researchers to recognize that reading disabilities can be lifelong, and that being able to read complex texts and achieve academically does not mean that an individual's reading difficulties have disappeared. In addition, we researchers have been reminded about the emotional toll of reading disability, even for an individual who is considered successful and high-achieving. Why, then, do schools continue to focus only on reading interventions and curricular modifications to support individuals with reading disabilities? Researchers cannot continue to ignore the social and emotional aspects of lifelong reading challenges. If we really want to increase the success of individuals with reading disability labels, we need to acknowledge and support them personally, socially, emotionally, and academically.

Acknowledgements

Thank you, Mari, for sharing so much of yourself. I am glad to know you, and have learned more from you than you will ever know. Thank you to Django Paris and Carol Sue Englert for supporting and encouraging this work.

References

- Adichie, C. (2009). *Chimamanda Adichie: The danger of a single story*. [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html
- Allington, R. L. (2002). You can't learn much from books you can't read. *Educational Leadership*, 60(3), 16-19.
- Allington, R. L. (2007). Intervention all day long: New hope for struggling readers. *Voices from the Middle*, 14(4), 7-14.
- Alvermann, D. E. (2001). Reading adolescents' reading identities: Looking back to see ahead. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 44(8), 676-690.
- Alvermann, D. E., & Mallozzi, C. A. (2009). Interpretive research. In McGill-Franzen & Allington (Eds.), *Handbook of reading disability research* (pp. 488-496). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Barone, D. M. (2011). Case-study research. In N. K. Duke & M. Mallette (Eds.), *Literacy research methodologies* (2nd ed., pp. 7-27). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Coddington, C. S. (2009). The effects of constructs of motivation that affirm and undermine reading achievement inside and outside of school on middle school students' reading achievement (Doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (ProQuest document ID 1974135421).
- Cole, M. (1998). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Collins, K. M. (2013). *Ability profiling and school failure* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Connor, D. J. (2008). *Urban narratives: Portraits in progress: Life at the intersections of learning disability, race, & social class*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
- Connor, D. J. (2013). Who "owns" disability? The cultural work of critical special educators as insider-outsiders. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 41(4), 494-513.
- Davis, J. M. (2000). Disability studies as ethnographic research and text: Research strategies and roles for promoting social change. *Disability & Society*, 15(2), 191-206.
- Donmeyer, R., & Kos, R. (1993). *At-risk students: Portraits, policies, programs, and practices*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Dudley-Marling, C. (2004). The social construction of learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 37(6), 482-489.
- Edwards, J. (1994). *Scars of dyslexia: Eight case studies in emotional reactions*. London, England: Cassell.
- Enriquez, G. (2011). Embodying exclusion: The daily melancholia and performative politics of struggling early adolescent readers. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*, 10(3), 90-112.

- Ferri, B. A. (2012). Undermining inclusion: A critical reading of response to intervention (RTI). *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 16(8), 863-880.
- Franzak, J. K. (2006). Zoom: A review of the literature on marginalized adolescent readers, literacy theory, and policy implications. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(2), 209-248.
- Friend, M. (2006). *Special education: Contemporary perspectives for school professionals*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Fuchs, D., Fuchs, L. S., & Stecker, P. M. (2010). The “blurring” of special education in a new continuum of general education placements and services. *Exceptional Children*, 76(3), 301-323.
- Fuchs, L. S., & Fuchs, D. (2009). Creating opportunities for intensive intervention for students with learning disabilities. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 42(2), 60-62.
- Gallagher, D. J., Connor, D. J., & Ferri, B. A. (2014). Beyond the far too incessant schism: Special education and the social model of disability. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 18(11), 1120-1142.
- Gee, J. P. (2000). Identity as an analytic lens for research in education. *Review of Research in Education*, 25, 99-125.
- Gee, J. P. (2008). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.
- Gersten, R., Fuchs, L. S., Williams, J. P., & Baker, S. (2001). Teaching reading comprehension strategies to students with learning disabilities: A review of research. *Review of Educational Research*, 71, 279-320.
- Glaser, B. G. (1965). The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *Social Problems*, 12(4), 436-445.
- Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Pearson.
- Greenleaf, C. L., & Hinchman, K. (2009). Reimagining our inexperienced adolescent readers: From struggling, striving, marginalized, and reluctant to thriving. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 53, 4-13.
- Hall, L. A. (2009). Struggling reader, struggling teacher: An examination of student-teacher transactions with reading instruction and text in social studies. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 43, 286-309.
- Harry, B., & Klingner, J. (2006). *Why are so many minority students in special education?: Understanding race & disability in schools*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Hill, M. L. (2009). *Beats, rhymes, and classroom life: Hip-hop pedagogy and the politics of identity*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Hock, M. F., Brasseur, I. F., Deshler, D. D., Catts, H. W., Marquis, J. G., Mark, C. A., & Stribling, J. W. (2009). What is the reading component skill profile of adolescent struggling readers in urban schools? *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 32, 21-38.
- Kirkland, D. E. (2011). Books like clothes: Engaging young black men with reading. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 55(3), 199-208.

- Kittle, P. (2013). *Book love: Developing depth, stamina, and passion in adolescent readers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Kos, R. (1991). Persistence of reading disabilities: The voices of four middle school students. *American Educational Research Journal*, 28(4), 875-895.
- May, A. L., & Stone, C. A. (2010). Stereotypes of individuals with learning disabilities: Views of college students with and without learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 43(6), 483-499.
- McCloskey, E. (2012). *Taking on a learning disability: At the crossroads of special education and adolescent literacy learning*. Poughkeepsie, NY: Information Age Publishing.
- McCray, A. D., Vaughn, S., & Neal, L. V. I. (2001). Not all students learn to read by third grade: Middle school students speak out about their reading disabilities. *Journal of Special Education*, 35, 17-30.
- McIntyre, E. (2011). Sociocultural perspectives on children with reading difficulties. In A. McGill-Franzen & R. Allington (Eds.), *Handbook of reading disability research* (pp. 45-56). New York, NY: Routledge.
- National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers (2010). *Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts/Literacy Standards*. Washington DC: Authors. Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/>
- Paris, D. (2011). "A friend who understand fully": Notes on humanizing research in a multiethnic youth community. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 24(2), 137-149.
- Paris, D. (2012). Becoming history: Learning from identity texts and youth activism in the wake of Arizona SB1070. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 14(2), 1-13.
- Paris, D., & Winn, M. T. (2013). *Humanizing research: Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities*. Washington, DC: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Pope, D. C. (2001). *"Doing school": How we are creating a generation of stressed out, materialistic, and miseducated students*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Pugach, M. C. (2001). The stories we choose to tell: Fulfilling the promise of qualitative research for special education. *Exceptional Children*, 67(4), 439-454.
- Rodis, P., Garrod, A., & Boscardin, M. L. (2000). *Learning disabilities and life stories*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Schatschneider, C., Wagner, R. K., & Crawford, E. (2008). The importance of measuring growth in response to intervention models: Testing a core assumption. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 18(3), 308-315.
- Shacklock, G., & Thorp, L. (2005). Life history and narrative approaches. In B. Somekh & C. Lewin, (Eds.), *Research methods in the social sciences* (pp. 156-163). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Shannon, P. (2007). *Reading against democracy: The broken promises of reading instruction*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- Street, B. V. (1987). *Literacy in theory and practice*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Torres-Velásquez, D. (2000). Sociocultural theory: Standing at the crossroads. *Remedial and Special Education*, 21(2), 66-69.
- Trent, S. C., Artiles, A. J., & Englert, C. S. (1998). From deficit thinking to social constructivism: A review of theory, research, and practice in special education. *Review of Research in Education*, 23, 277-307.
- Troia, G. A., & Olinghouse, N. G. (2013). The common core state standards and evidence-based educational practices: The case of writing. *School Psychology Review*, 42(3), 343-357.
- Valencia, S. W. (2011). Reader profiles and reading disabilities. In A. McGill-Franzen & R. L. Allington (Eds.), *Handbook of reading disability research* (pp. 25-35). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Valle, J. W., Solis, S., Volpitta, D., & Connor, D. J. (2004). The disability closet: Teachers with learning disabilities evaluate the risks and benefits of “coming out.” *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 37, 4-17.
- Wagner, M., Cameto, R., & Newman, L. (2003). *Youth with disabilities: A changing population: A report of findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) and the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
- Wanzek, J., Vaughn, S., Scammacca, N. K., Metz, K., Murray, C. S., Roberts, G., & Danielson, L. (2013). Extensive reading interventions for students with reading difficulties after grade 3. *Review of Educational Research*, 83(2), 163-195.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Winn, M. T. (2011). *Girl time: Literacy, justice, and the school-to-prison pipeline*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Woodcock, C. (2010). “I allow myself to feel now...”: Adolescent girls’ negotiations of embodied knowing, the female body, and literacy. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 42(4), 349-384.

Literature Cited

- Babbitt, N. (1975). *Tuck everlasting*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.
- Collins, S. (2008). *The hunger games*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Rowling, J. K. (1997). *Harry Potter and the sorcerer’s stone*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Steinbeck, J. (1952). *East of Eden*. New York, NY: The Viking Press.
- Williams-Garcia, R. (2010) *One crazy summer*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.